

## **SEA Communities of Practice: Project Directors Discuss Their Lessons Learned**

### **Slides 1 & 2**

**ROB:** First of all, I'd like to offer greetings and welcome everyone back to the National Charter School Resource Center's SEA Communities of Practice webinar series. Today's presentation will be Project Directors Discuss Their Lessons Learned.

### **Slide 3**

About the Charter School Center: The U.S. Department of Education is committed to promoting effective practices, providing technical assistance, and disseminating the resources critical to ensuring the success of charter schools across the country. To that end, the Education Department, under contract with Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research, has developed the National Charter School Resource Center.

### **Slide 4**

Today's agenda will be as follows. We will first have an update from the associate assistant deputy secretary and acting director of the charter schools program, Mr. Scott Pearson, who will provide the group with a few charter school program competition updates. Next, our guests Denise Mund and Cindy Murphy will share their presentations, which will be followed by a question-and-answer session at the end of the presentations. Participants: Do remember that you can submit a question at any time during the webcast by entering a question in the chat section on the left-hand side of your screen. You can also raise your hand—electronically, obviously—during the Q & A sessions. I will direct as many questions as possible to the presenters after the presentation. With all that being said, I will turn the floor over to Scott, and I believe we have Leslie Hankerson on as well, who we understand will provide us with a few important updates related to the Charter School Program grants, timeline, and perhaps updates around funding as well. Scott? or Leslie.



LESLIE: Well, actually, I think Scott is on.

SCOTT: Yeah, I'm here—sorry.

ROB: Sorry about that, Scott.

SCOTT: No, I apologize.

ROB: So, I was just telling our listeners that you all had a few updates around the Charter School Program grants, timeline, and perhaps some related funding updates as well.

SCOTT: Sure, so, first of all, I apologize that the notice inviting applications for this year's SEA program has not been published yet. We'd hoped to publish it right at the beginning of the year. I expect it to be published imminently, so I would...—and we will send a note out to everybody the minute it's published and we'll likely provide people with somewhere between 30 and 45 days to complete the application. One of the challenges to running a competition this year is that we still do not have an appropriation from Congress. Our fiscal year begins October 1. In theory, we should have an appropriation by October 1. That almost never happens. But what usually happens is, we have an appropriation by the end of the calendar year. What happened this year was, Congress adjourned without appropriating any money, and so they passed a continuing resolution through, I believe, March the fourth. What a continuing resolution does is it basically puts us on last year's budget and literally every day we receive one 365th of last year's allocation. And so, by March fourth we will have received about half of our total allocation from last year, but what we don't know is whether the actual appropriation will be passed and if so, what it will have in it.

And it's difficult for me to predict what will happen. One possibility is that we could be on a continuing resolution all year; another possibility is that we could have an appropriation that is at last year's level or perhaps even slightly above it. We requested a substantial increase. Last year, we received 256 million dollars and we requested 310 million for the program. I think it's probably not likely that we would receive an allocation of that size. But it's also possible that given the stated desire of many newly elected members of Congress to

considerably cut the budget this year, that the charter school appropriation could actually be lower. So we just don't know. We expect that we'll have a better sense of it by the time the competition closes, and so then we'll be in a better position to know how much money we can actually grant. But at this point, as you will see when the notice gets published, is, we simply make estimates of the approximate amount that will be available. So that's my update on where things stand. Let me ask if anybody has any questions.

CLIFF: Scott, this is Cliff, calling from New York State.

SCOTT: Yeah, hi, Cliff.

CLIFF: I heard—there was some mention before about a new provision around oversight of authorizers and for [silence]test bills. Does that die along with the omnibus [silence]?

SCOTT: Yeah, that's a good question. We sent out to all of you, some of the language that was in, I believe, the Senate version of the omnibus appropriations bill. And that would have put a number of requirements on each of you with respect to oversight of your authorizers. That provision died with the omnibus and so it currently does not exist; and under the continuing resolution, we're not obligated by the language that you all saw. It is possible that that language could come back in any appropriation that is made in March. And so, I think I wouldn't say it's completely gone, because it's possible it could be there.

CLIFF: But we're not going to be explicitly asked to address it in the [silence].

SCOTT: You know, I think it would be inappropriate for me to tell you what you will or won't be asked to address in the upcoming competition. Because I would be giving you guys information that I'm not giving to the general public. So, as much as I would like to talk about it, I think we'll have to wait till it's actually published.

CLIFF: Okay.

SCOTT: But it's not currently in the law and we—it would be unusual for us to ask you to do something that didn't have a basis in the law, unless we went through a formal rule-making process.

CLIFF: Okay, thanks.

SCOTT: Sure. Any other questions? All right, well, thanks, everybody, for listening, and I guess we'll turn it over to Denise and Cindy.

ROB: Thanks, Scott. Today's first presenter, as Scott just mentioned, is Denise Mund, who currently leads the Schools of Choice unit at the Colorado Department of Education, where she has worked for more than 12 years administering the CSP grant.

## **Slide 5**

Prior to that, she helped start four charter schools as a founding board member. Again, welcome, Denise.

## **Slide 6**

It would be great if you could start off and please tell our audience a little more about your CSP leadership lessons learned.

DENISE: Thank you, Rob. And I'm going to be addressing more of the external part of this, and Cindy, who will be following me, is going to talk more about the internal process.

## **Slide 7**

And so both of our presentations will complement each other. First, I just wanted to say that there's been a great deal of effort by our unit at the Colorado Department of Education to really focus on "What are the needs of the charter school community?" and, in doing so, we have really focused on listening. And so, I think one of the themes, or one of the things that we continually talk about, is listening to the field and doing that in a variety of ways. Sometimes it means what questions are being asked or should be asked. Sometimes we have to kind of drive the discussion when we see a need arising, and other times, it's probably very evident to everybody.

One of the things that we have done is ask the user groups what they need help with. For instance, the business managers' network that we

administer; we have another program for administrators and another one for governing board members. We also consider ourselves to be the eyes and ears for both federal and state policy changes, either what has already come down in communicating that to the field or identifying what are the needs of the future. Sometimes we address that by asking for a research project to be done that would provide further information on what kinds of policy would be effective in addressing the need. Sometimes it's necessary for us to develop resources that would provide solutions or guidance. But we spend a lot of time listening to people by, for instance, visiting the schools, and that includes impromptu visits—in other words, just developing a relationship.

We are always prepared to be flexible, because I think that's part of the nature of charter schools is that things are constantly changing, and so we put together agendas, oftentimes based on the suggestions that we get.

## **Slide 8**

So, what does it look like to be listening to the field? For instance, with our charter school administrators, we had some school support teams that were out and they hear different needs of the administrators and document them in their reports that they give to the schools. Oftentimes, it was that the administrators were feeling isolated and that they really didn't have anybody else that they could network with. And so, we had done a research study and provided information, for instance, on turnover, and while turnover of our charter school administrators improved, before when we'd done a study, it was 18 months, and now it's up to four years. We thought that was great, but the administrators were still feeling isolated and they didn't have the opportunity many times to have a close relationship with their governing board president. And so, they needed somebody else at the administrator level.

## **Slide 9**

And so we brought together a small group of seasoned administrators that were willing to share their best practices, and we also identified, primarily through our grant program, novice leaders that were looking

for peers and other people to network with. And so we brought together this group. They meet quarterly. It started with a request from, actually, a seasoned administrator that said surely all of these forms for starting a new charter school would all be in one place, and we said no, there isn't anything right now, but that's a great idea.

And so again, we used a small group of administrators to put together a comprehensive handbook—so we have that online. We started getting them together on a regular basis and usually over a meal—attendance is better that way, and people weren't in such a rush to get out of there—and we talked about the need for more one-on-one guidance. Many of the administrators would bring their, like, current hot topic to the meeting and be able to discuss it. But what they were really looking for was somebody that they could just pick up the phone and call and ask what they considered might have been a novice question or something that they didn't want to ask formally. They wanted it to be more informal and personal.

And so we identified a mentoring group and, in doing so, we focused on those that had already demonstrated success, ones that we had a great deal of confidence in. It was a pretty elite group to be able to be approved to be a mentor, and then we kind of did like a speed dating game at one of the administrator meetings, and through that, each of the mentees identified their top priority and their second preference for a mentor and then we matched them up according to their needs and their personalities. Through this process, we are using the administrators' handbook as the curriculum and we are developing a mentors' curriculum. And again, this is all out of the actual practice of doing the mentoring. We have combined it with a number of the other programs that we do, such as the comprehensive school evaluations. The mentor principal goes to the debriefing of that report with the mentee principal and kind of walks them through how to make that an action plan and focus school reform efforts on that. We are hoping that the mentees that graduate out of the start-up and implementation grant program will, when they are done or, in at least their third year, be able to provide that same kind of benefit for the other new principals that come along.

## Slide 10

Another example of where we have listened to the field to develop a program was the charter school governing boards, and so we have the online training modules—and many of you that are in on this webinar I'm sure are familiar with that—that is at [boardtrainingmodules.org](http://boardtrainingmodules.org) and it is specific to Colorado charter schools, but we have had interest from other states, and I believe they are pretty easy to modify, and we will be happy to share any of the background information on it—whatever we can to make it easier for you. We also, once a semester, do a regional training. Our state is very geographically diverse, and so, while we can offer some regional trainings, we can't get to everybody, but we really do prefer that folks use those online training modules. In fact, we have authorizers that are now writing that into their charter contracts that—either a new charter school board and/or individuals that are new to an existing school—everyone must take those 30 modules within the first year of operation.

For authorizers, there's been a number of projects [on which] we have worked together with our state authorizer—which is the Charter School Institute—and our state charter association—which is the League of Charter Schools—and we work together initially to develop a standard application and review rubric. We just within the last couple of months did an update on that based on new law, and we fleshed out that review rubric even more. In fact, just yesterday we took that to the larger authorizers' group that meets at least four times a year to get their feedback on how that'll look in implementation.

Another product that we developed was the model contract language and samples. We had authorizers that asked for this. We were kind of hesitant to do [so] at first, but they convinced us. And so we just updated that also and again, [for] pretty much everything, we've relied on the NACSA principles and samples that they have available, and so it's gone through a pretty extensive conversation before it was ever even released.

Then, [among] new products that we have just developed is the renewal framework. In other words, the five-year process of the information that's collected in kind of a running record file so that renewal is not like a separate renewal application, which is what our

Colorado law kind of indicates a renewal applicant should do, and that it's more tied into our state accreditation system.

We also have a closure checklist. All of the steps while a school is still going through the appeal process. And then, once it is final, that they can use the checklist as far as closure.

## **Slide 11**

Some of the other things that we have used, we use leaders from the field with demonstrated success. We watch and see how they operate. The charter school community is still pretty close-knit, and so we really purposefully work on developing those relationships and finding out who's doing the best things at their schools. And we admire the principals that focus on their schools and are not out trying to just do PR for their schools. Instead, they really focus on student results. And so we try to honor that. We have collaborated, as I've said, on a number of resources. This has expanded as we've gained credibility across the state as being focused on quality charter schools and not just for charter schools at any cost.

And so, the materials that we've put out do demonstrate high quality and [have] communicated the message that we have high standards for what should be going on in the charter schools and that's universally supported. We do try to model best practices and continuous improvement. We do a lot of surveys and just plain one-on-one, but we do both formal and informal listening sessions where we get feedback, whether it's on a training that we've done or just plain general programming that we come up with. And we also try to be really transparent. We realize we don't have all of the answers and that we learn whenever we go out, and so, like, for instance, our state is going through a new accreditation system. This year is the first year it's implemented and we've gone to a number of functions where the schools are there and we're learning right along with them and we explain that we want to be able to better support them and in doing so we need to understand more fully what it is that they're going through.



## Slides 12 & 13

So, that sums up what we've been doing here. And again, the priority is being responsive to the needs of the charter school community in Colorado and kind of a general theme that we do for everything. Rob, did you want to take it back?

ROB: Sure, absolutely, thank you. First, I wanted to see if there were any questions. We're pretty much on schedule. We can either ask Denise a few questions right now or we can wait until the end of the session. So, given the fact that we're barely on schedule right now, if anyone has any questions, again you can feel free to put them over on the left-hand side of the screen or when we get to the Q & A portion at the end, after Cindy, we will solicit questions then.

## Slides 14 & 15

On to our second presenter, who is Cindy Murphy, who is currently the state project director at the Minnesota Department of Education, an advisory board member here at the National Charter School Resource Center, among many other things, and we'll let Cindy tell the audience a little more about her lessons learned after twelve years of implementing the CSP program.

CINDY: Well, thanks much, Rob. Actually, it's only been eight years, but I appreciate the extra four years. And I realize I forgot to send a detailed bio. So for those of you that aren't familiar with me, I started working with the Charter Schools Grant program in 2002 and I've pretty much been in this role of managing our state's grant project for [silence]. As Denise and I chatted about how to share lessons learned...as she mentioned, she talked about some of the more externally focused lessons or strategies, and I'm going to share with you some of the more internal things that we found to be helpful, insightful, and sometimes kind of almost game-changing as we manage our federal grant program and really work to support the growth of truly high-quality, high-performing charter schools.

## Slide 16

One of the things that has been my personal experience is that collaboration across our [silence] and, for those of you, SEA is just the acronym I'm using for State Education Agency, that's really key. When I started working with the grant program, there was almost a complete lack of collaboration and—not to be disrespectful to my colleagues here at the department—but, you know, I think the level of education and information about charters and knowledge as well as kind of levels of animosity about charters was just very, very different. And you know, we had some groups that just because they personally didn't believe in charters that they brought that perspective to work, which was really unfortunate. And so, we've gone from kind of a charter office that, you know, was perceived to be part of an SEA that was anticharter to now, especially in the last several years, charter schools or charter school team and really support for high-quality charters has actually been a priority for our SEA administration. And so, it's changed quite a bit, but not without some struggles and some challenges along the way.

One of the things that we found is most critical in order to ensure that collaboration is that you're really working together with your division of special ed and your division of program finance, as well as your other federal programs divisions. In Minnesota, it's separate, and so Title I and all the other title programs are housed at the complete opposite end of our building. And so we've had to work actively to ensure that we're coordinating on behalf of new charters. As Denise mentioned, you know, one of the developers was, like, "Well, isn't everything in the same place?" And I had to chuckle to myself, because in Minnesota, it's definitely not. And it's almost a test of strategy and wisdom just to try to figure out who's the person to call for this application, what's the due date for this form, how do we arrange transportation to how do we file for federal food nutrition support. And so, it really is very challenging for new developers. And so we've worked together intentionally, really on the behalf to support the new charters.

Another example of that is that we provide a series of preoperational development training for charters ranging from our special education folks talking about basic concepts, requirements, and then applications; our title and other federal program folks talking about the

same; what's available; what's required; what you need to do to provide support to your students. And so, while we don't provide all the training to charters, we definitely have an instrumental role in kind of coordinating that training from the groups across the agency.

I also have on here "To learn respect, language, and culture of other divisions." We've often served as kind of a liaison. We may have divisions whose expectations of schools, including charters, are just "Learn it the hard way, and if you don't do it right we're going to take back the money and then you'll know." Well, that's very much not our philosophy in working with charters, especially new charters. And so, we've kind of spent some time helping other divisions understand the unique needs of charters and if they don't have the capacity or the inclination or ability to kind of change the way their services are rolled out or the requirements are administered that we might kind of be there on behalf of the charters to help, again, support what they need to get done.

Finally, on here I have, you know, "Ensure your charter school program, your federal grant project, is aligned with other SEA initiatives." Many of you have been involved with states that competed for Race to the Top funds. While Minnesota wasn't successful, our team was very much involved in helping to shape the application and really weigh in on aspects that address school reform, charter schools, school choice, and turnaround schools. We're looking forward to the leadership of our new administration and are kind of taking proactive measures to ensure that the goals and the priorities of our charter team are made very clear to our new administration.

What I have at the bottom of the slide as an exclamation point and just kind of offering a specific suggestion regarding those of you that are due to recompile for a state award or, perhaps, those of you that are on docket to be monitored by the WestEd monitoring project. And here I offer to clearly identify agency supports across the SEA. Whether it's been a federal grant renewal application or in preparing for our monitoring visit, which we had last January, we did spend a lot of time in coordinating among the different divisions to make sure that the section in our application that addressed how we ensure that charter schools receive all the federal funds that they're eligible for in a timely manner, how are they educated and informed about those funds. While

we may not do that directly as part of the charter team, we do help ensure that the folks that have the money and have the instructions are part of a conversation or at the table or we're definitely pulling the information from them.

## Slide 17

My second lesson learned is about compliance and confidence. You know, kind of bottom line here, what I've really found over the years is that if you deal with compliance issues, let's call those kind of the small stuff, that yes, you do need to sweat the small stuff in order to really have the time to focus on the big stuff and the fun stuff. And I often talk to charter grantees about that. They may not have a propensity or an interest in filling out forms, getting reports on time, registering as an online user in our reporting system, making sure that they're a nonprofit, making sure they have their federal IRS papers in, that's not why they become a charter developer, but it becomes very, very important in starting a charter and running a legal charter school. Well, the same kind of applies here. We've really found that—when we dot our *i*'s and cross our *t*'s, we make sure that costs are allowable, that we have documentation before we release payment, and other kind of basic and grant management compliance issues—that we can, you know, really just get on with the objectives of our grant projects: you know, the stuff that we're really excited about.

I inherited this grant project when there was really no system for compliance and accountability in place. And so, a lot of my time, especially in the first couple years, was spent in cleaning up. But it's really made a difference, and now that we have kind of effective systems for the most part, they manage themselves on a regular basis and they just involve checking in, [rather] than just being continuously bombarded with “Why did you pay this?” “This is not allowable cost,” and having folks from across the department come up and say, “You know, you need to redo this, you need to take money back from the grantee,” which—that is something we really try to prevent at all costs.

I've made grant processes as transparent as possible. You know, really, there's no reason to have secrets. If you have an evaluative rubric, publish it in the RFP or go through it in detailed format when you're doing training so that everyone is on the same page and that's

both internally as well. We make sure to notify our internal stakeholders what we're doing, when we're doing it, and always invite them to participate. Now, given everyone's overwhelming workload, it's not always possible that they can read grants or participate in training, but at the very least, the more you're open and transparent about your process, the more support that you'll likely have.

Be consistent, fair, and use data to back up decisions. We've definitely had to make some tough decisions. As Denise mentioned, in Colorado, you know, they had to really—in order to kind of establish credibility—focus on quality, and we even recently, in our grant-making process, we had two pretty high-profile applicants that were not approved. And initially, I think, as I've heard, there were ripples throughout our Minnesota charter community as to “What's going on, how can they do that? I can't believe that those groups weren't funded.” What it really came down to was that we had a clear process we used, obviously a peer review panel that used a detailed rubric as guidance. They were trained ahead of time. We had a meeting of all reviewers after their initial review and part of my facilitation is you need to focus on the rubric, you need to focus on the instructions. Even though you may know this, or even though you may have been told that, you can't bring that to the table. And so we felt very good about our process, even though part of the decision was not very well received and was not very popular. But again, the more you kind of charter untamed waters and you move in directions of heightening your expectations of your grantees, have your ducks in order and have the data to back up your decisions.

The last example here I have is address USDE monitoring findings ASAP. You can invest energy in arguing or disagreeing or making a case for yourself, which I think is something we all have an initial inclination to do when someone has found something we're doing to not be appropriate or good or satisfactory, but once that kind of initial kind of report comes out, you know, and no one loves to receive a 30- to 50-page report that completely examines everything you do on a day-to-day basis, but I really encourage you that once you've kind of digested that to really focus on “Okay, what's here in this report, what findings can we address and how can we address these ASAP so, again, we can get back to the fun stuff and can focus on the overall objectives of our grant project.”

The example here I have in the renewal application, Minnesota did have findings in our monitoring report, and we intend to be very transparent about those. We're going to say, "Hey, WestEd, you know, they found that we weren't disseminating charter school best practices to all LEAs in the state." In fact, we got a 1, and that, you know, that hurt to receive a 1, but at the same time, we recognized it as a weakness. And so, we plan to address that and to propose in hopefully a very positive way how we intend to improve on that expectation in our renewal application.

## **Slide 18**

Don't hesitate to ask. For those of you that have been at some of the workshops and the trainings I've done before, at our annual meetings you've heard me say this: "You know, this is not a grant program where you just go ahead and do it and ask for forgiveness later." I know that many of us that's more of our style. You're going to find that life is much easier if you just ask questions. And so, what I have here as examples: Communicate with your program officer at USDE if you're intending to make a change, an administrative change in your grant project. Check ahead of time. You may not like the answer that they provide you with, but at the same time, you may have prevented having to spend time undoing a mess or, you know, not having allowable costs if you don't ensure that things are kosher ahead of time.

Don't make assumptions internally. Getting back to the work with the different divisions in our agency, it's easy to assume that they're going to be communicating with charters just like standard districts, but charters aren't necessarily like standard districts. They may not have a "superintendent" and, if we don't make sure that charter school directors or school leaders are in the same category as a traditional district superintendent, they may miss out on some really critical communication.

My third example here is ask your peers—those of us on the phone—to share resources, samples of policies, manuals, as well as approved applications. We've talked about this in the past as well. You know, it's okay to borrow and to really build off of the successes of what's

already gone on out there. For those of you that are pretty new, there's a wealth of information, resources, tools, just a bunch of information and sometimes it's just a matter of sending an e-mail or a quick call to one of your peers to ask for that information.

My suggestion here with the exclamation point is acknowledge what you've borrowed and learned. While I said it's okay to do that, I encourage you to be careful that if you are heavily borrowing or you've heavily adapted something from another state, you know, that you give them credit. Just as when we look at subgrant applications, if they're borrowing a model a school model or a design model or an education program from another school in Minnesota, don't say it's your innovative invention that you've come up with. You know, that really undermines the, kind of, the credibility of that subgrant application. The same thing at the state level: I just really encourage you to acknowledge what you've borrowed, what you've used, and why, showing that you've not only done your homework, but you're looking to replicate something that's worked well in another state, in your own state.

## **Slide 19**

And finally, focus on high performance. This is something that has been a challenge for us in Minnesota. Collectively, on kind of an aggregate average level our charter schools do not perform better than the state average for absolute proficiency. So it's definitely something that we've really had to examine critically, take a hard look at, and really try to figure out some solutions to really not just increasing proficiency and performance, but really making the case that charter schools are providing a better option for the students they serve than the existing options that are available in the traditional system.

The first thing, with an exclamation point, is define expectations for high performance, whether it has to do with your actual accountability standards, your accountability performance standards at the state level for all schools, or whether it has to do with how you hold your grantees to standards of performance in the grant project. Make sure they're well defined and well communicated.

Charter school program grant management consistent with state law

and your approved SEA grants: We found that our state law is not always uniformly consistent with the requirements and regulations in the federal CSP project, and so we've actually had to get on top of that on behalf of our schools and not lead them to believe that oh, just because state law says you can do it—or, because it's in federal regs—it's something you can do in Minnesota. And so, make sure that you acknowledge and work toward consistency, but at the same time, if there are differences, to make sure that your grantees are very knowledgeable about which requirement they need to adhere to.

Hold your subgrantees to high standards, of course. But make sure that you provide them with support and resources to help them succeed. You know, it's one thing to say “Hey, this is what we expect of you,” but if you're really not offering supports or connections to resources and networking, it's going to be really difficult for those developing schools to be successful.

Getting back to what I mentioned earlier, training for developing and preoperational schools: We found that supports not just from the SEA, but also from your authorizers and charter school resource centers out there in the community, but it's really critical to ensure that they have training and technical assistance. Now things are much more intentional, expectations are much more higher, and the standards, overall standards, are not what they were in 1992 when the first charter school opened in Minnesota. And so we've really had to step up to the plate as well, as an SEA, and make sure that we were helping or connecting our schools to the training and technical assistance that they need.

And the example here is, Weave throughout your SEA application. So, you know, one of the things that we intend to do as we gear up to recompetes, is to really ensure that it's no secret, you know, that we are truly focusing on high performance, academic accountability, increased performance—even with the charter schools that are serving some of the hardest-to-reach and the lowest persistently performing populations. And so it's something that, you know, in this day and age it's not just about having charter schools and starting charter schools, but really ensuring that the charters that we're supporting through the federal grant program are going to be offering a high-quality education opportunity for those students. And that's it.



## Slide 20

ROB: Okay. Thank you very much, Cindy. At this time we would like to open the floor to more questions. We'd especially like to hear any lessons learned or tidbits of wisdom that any others on the call have gleaned from their respective experiences. But I'll get it started here by asking of all of these points of insights that both of you all shared, what would you consider to be the mission-critical or the top three things for new CSP program directors, based off your years of experience?

## Slides 21 & 22 [not displayed during presentation]

DENISE: Well, this is Denise and I'll jump in. Cindy brought up something that I remember being one of those things where I kind of felt like I was navigating in the dark trying to figure out what to do and that is when you deny a charter school a grant application and it's very political and there's a lot of pressure being put on you—I would like to hear what Cindy's process is also—but when I went through it the first time, I did some research on what other states were doing and used that to put together our model here. But a few highlights of that: The letter stating that they were denied a grant application should have the disclaimer on there that they have the right to appeal through the EDGAR provisions and if anybody wants to see what our disclaimer says I'd be happy to share it. But then they have 30 days to appeal and our appeal process is that I send the application out to three grant reviewers that were not involved in the grant review process and the average of their three scores determines if it's funded or not. And if it's not funded, then they're notified again and their appeal is exhausted. I have had individual applicants that have appealed that to the U.S. Department of Education and what we found was that the U.S. Department supported us as a state on the issues that were raised. Cindy, what do you guys do in Minnesota?

CINDY: Well, I find this a very interesting question and in the spirit of true transparency, we actually don't have an appeal process for discretionary grant making. [Inaudible] grant notice, which is a grant opportunity notice has clear language that the decision made by the commissioner, our state SEA administrator, is final. And my understanding was because it's discretionary that that's allowable. And

so, I can get back to you on some research I may need to do to make sure that that's the case. But what we *do* do is, whenever a subgrant application is denied, is that we provide a full feedback. So ahead of time, before the letter goes out, I have summarized or our staff has summarized all the scores and these are the final scores which sometimes, as you know, may be adjusted during that final review meeting when they come together and discuss their individual reviews and then all the comments, both the strengths and the weaknesses or gaps or discrepancies and those are fully, you know, kind of combed through to make sure they're appropriate. We don't write comments for reviewers, but we do make sure that they're presented in a professional manner so that when that information is sent out to a denied applicant that they have the full story—all the facts, Jack—as far as why their application was denied.

DENISE: And I would just add to that—we do some of the same things—but when we have that review day, everybody that's in the charter school program on the program staff, we all review the summary score sheets where those comments are made and we actually have to initial the back to make sure that there isn't anything inappropriate on there and then when we send those out to all of the applicants, we cover up the names of those that reviewed it, but they get everything that's on that summary sheet and then everything else is shredded. I actually went through... A denied applicant one time brought in five individuals to make copies of everything in my office. It took 'em two days and they used two copiers. And so—kind of the Open Records Request Queen in our department, in having lived through that experience—I guard what ends up in our files.

CINDY: Good point.

ROB: Along these same lines, are there other major challenges that you experienced along the way that come to mind? I mean, major mistakes or “if I knew then what I know now” type of situations that you came across that you think would be valuable to some of our participants and if you could tell us what adjustments you made or what you did to overcome those obstacles or to learn from them.

Denise: Well, this is Denise again; I'll jump in. When I was new to the program, I spent a fair amount of time on the Internet researching what other

states were doing and then doing the same thing with the Competitive Grants and Awards Unit here in our department. There's so many universal best practices that I found that I implemented and—I guess, to me—that's more the easy learning because you can learn from what others are doing well. I certainly have made a lot of the hard mistakes and we had to learn from those also.

ROB: That's very much so akin to not trying to reinvent the wheel and I heard earlier just to make sure that you give proper due credit to the organizations whose tools or processes you've borrowed from.

Now, I want to talk a little bit more, particularly with you, Denise, that you really seem like in Colorado you've gone out of your way to develop these external responsiveness components, if you will. Does that—do you find that it gives you, has it really established a better rapport with your grantees or has it yielded, you know, better applications, less remediation? What have you seen as some of the fruits of your labor related to your very strong external and responsiveness approach?

DENISE: Well, early on when we started to look at why charter schools were closing, I think out of the first 11 that closed, all but two were for financial reasons. And so, that's when we started to put together our charter school business managers network. And, yeah, we did immediately see an impact on that and that group continues to meet on a regular basis and is very strong. And so the amount of support we have for charter school business managers is actually pretty high and has continued. I think that program's been going on for eight years now. And so, yeah, we've seen, you know, the fruits of our labors there and yet, you know, there's always going to be some schools that are closing for financial reasons. I think many times even though we can put the information out there and provide, you know, like, even the one-on-one support, it's kind of like you can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink. So they still need to own what it is that they do and how they implement. I would say the same thing for our grant program. We give a large degree of support as they're writing it, but they don't always follow our advice. And so I think there's kind of a balance there.

ROB: Excellent. I had a question for Cindy as well. She talked about working within and collaborating within the SEA with the other offices that are obviously charged with supporting the same, you know, student population. I was wondering in Minnesota, was there a political shift or was there any political clout leveraging that assisted with the cultural shift that seemingly took place in Minnesota at the time or was it just good old-fashioned consistency on you and your office's behalf?

CINDY: Good question and I personally can take the entire credit—no, I'm just joking. Most definitely, we had a governor that was extremely supportive of school choice and charter schools and he appointed a commissioner that supported it. And so we were fortunate—and I'll be the first, I should have disclosed that initially; sorry for any confusion—extremely fortunate to have both a commissioner, deputy commissioner, as well as assistant commissioners that got it as far as that charter schools could be an exceptionally good, high-quality option, but at the same time knew that if they weren't quality charters something had to be done. And so, yes, we had the support through leadership, but, you know, as those of you know who have worked in the trenches of SEAs, the leadership's perspective doesn't always trickle down. And so—I don't know—if we would have continued with a new governor and a new commissioner that was somewhat indifferent, that didn't really have a strong opinion either way about charters which was reflective of the former administration when I first started working with charters, I don't know that we'd be in the same position. And so, you know, we've definitely benefited from the years that charters have been around. But the leadership support from the governor's office on down has really been critical to kind of everyone playing on the same team, so to speak.

ROB: Excellent, excellent. And I have I think one last piece here. Again, if any of our participants have any questions, please feel free to put them on the left side of the screen in the chat box or you can raise your hand on the right. There was a consistent theme of transparency and I think having worked as an authorizer I know what that means at the authorizer level. In your own words, why do you think it's very, very important for those involved in the charter community at all levels to be as transparent as possible? I don't know whether that was intended or not, but it was definitely a recurring theme there.

DENISE: I think it's important in developing a trusting relationship that they know that they can expect honesty and that we'll admit when we make mistakes or we have shortcomings. They realize that we're human then and that we're approachable. I think oftentimes because we represent the state there's a perception that they can't talk to us and we have to get over that bridge. And personally, I have found that even just plain dropping into a school, so that it's a casual thing and almost like the neighbor coming into your home kind of a thing, that that sends a strong message that you are approachable and that you value the relationship.

CINDY: This is Cindy. I completely echo what Denise just said. It makes a lot of sense.

## **Slide 23**

ROB: Excellent. Well, on those closing words of wisdom I'd like to, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education and Learning Point Associates at AIR, thank both our presenters and our participants for today's very insightful webinar. A recording of the webcast will be available by January 21st at the link ...